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ABSTRACT

A total of 431 households in Tallahassee, Florida, were contacted to ascertain community perceptions of social policy issues, as required of television stations applying for license renewal. It was found that 10 percent of those contacted could think of no problems; 14 percent could not name a national problem, and 35 percent could not name a local problem. Tentative findings showed that most of those unable to name a problem were female, black, with less than high school education. Voluntary contact of stations to articulate problems was also investigated. Most complainers were articulate, concerned males. (SK)

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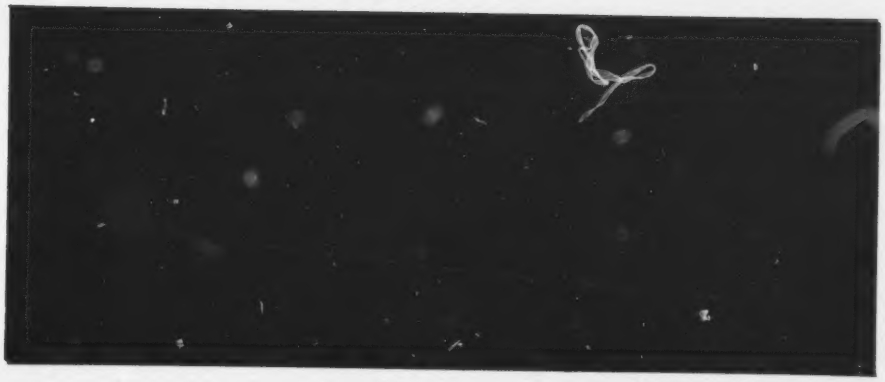

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PROBLEM PERCEPTION IN ASCERTAINMENT SURVEYS AND VOLUNTARY CONTACT WITH THE BROADCAST MEDIA*

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Ascertainment surveys of various types have been required of American broadcast stations for some time. Early scholarly interest in ascertainment focused upon the adequacy of various methodological strategies being employed in the station management.[1] Related studies dealt with the utilization of such data in the actual application for renewal. The deficiencies in the current ascertainment procedures are well known, and a recent call for comment in Docket 19715 deals with this issue particularly.

Most of the scholarly research dealing with ascertainment surveys has focused upon the social policy issues implicit in the requirement that a broadcaster have contact with both community leaders and a survey of the general public. The shift in primer procedures which required contacted individuals to give their "list" of problems, needs and interests of the community is no doubt an improvement over the old policy when individuals cited the types of programming they desired in local broadcasting schedules. Both Baldwin and LeRoy have dealt with issues that flow from a consideration of such surveys as accurate barometers of community sentiment and opinion.[2] At present, respondents in various status groups (leaders, general public) contacted by an ascertainment survey are asked to cite any local problem, interest or need that comes to mind.

In particular who are those people who perceive local and national problems? Are they representative of the community in terms of standard demographic descriptors? Or are there any unique characteristics of problem perceivers that should be

considered in ascertainment surveys? For example, problem perceivers may devote most of their leisure time to the print media and little to electronic journalism.

A related problem for some broadcasters are those individuals who voluntarily contact his station to complain or praise his programming. What generalizations can be drawn about the representativeness of those unsolicited comments? Little research has been performed in the area of voluntary citizen contact of the broadcast media.[3] The broadcaster has a form of citizen feedback in terms of his ratings, but this is a rather sterile form of communication. Of particular interest would be any possible relationship between voluntary media contact about programming and problem perception in terms of a typical ascertainment survey. For example, the person who complains about programming might also be the person who perceives the largest number of community problems. Or the converse, complainers could tend to be limited to only thinking about programming and not able or interested in perceiving community problems.

Thus, when asked to perform a conventional ascertainment survey for a commercial broadcaster, a number of questions were inserted that sought to initially examine the relationships between voluntary citizen feedback to broadcasters and the number and type of community problems perceived.

METHOD

In the Fall of 1971 a telephone survey was conducted in Tallahassee, Florida. Every Nth number was drawn from a telephone directory utilizing a random number procedure that controlled for pagination and columnization. A total of 431 calls were placed, with 86 numbers being disconnected. Repeated call-backs were utilized across the

five days of telephoning utilizing the procedures outlined in the Contam Studies.[4] Of the total, 24 were not at home, 36 were refusals and the remaining 21 calls reached baby sitters, for a completion rate of 65%. Of those contacted and not refusing a completion rate of 82% (i.e., 278 completions over 345 parties reached on the telephone) was achieved. All interviewers were female undergraduate students.

The format of the questionnaire employed in this study followed closely the recommended open-ended questions suggested by the National Association of Broadcasters.[5] Therefore, the questions dealing with national problems preceded those dealing with local problems. Naturally the national problem questions function more as prods for the respondent to begin to think of those issues and concerns in his daily life, rather than as being meters of public opinion. Being open-ended questions, the respondent is required to muster his own resources in order to articulate a problem or need of the community.

FINDINGS

In this study, ten percent of the sample could not think of either a national or local problem. Of particular interest is the profile of the respondent who perceived no problems. Depending upon one's point of view, these findings will be heartening or disheartening. Simply put, no one generic type of respondent emerged. There were a number of trends in the data, but it should be stressed that none of them reached statistical significance.

Those who reported no problems generally were females, more likely to be black, have a high school education or less

and have lived in the city less than seven years. The person more apt to perceive problems will tend to be the converse: a male, with some college education, white, and a resident of the city more than three years.

Tabular analysis is a common analytic tool in survey analysis; still, it is somewhat cumbersome. Therefore, the data here were converted, where appropriate, into dummy variables to allow for more powerful statistical analysis.[6]

The possible relationships between the number of problems perceived and a variety of demographic issues were analyzed. No initial zero order relations were found for age, sex and race. However, education($r=.17$) income ($r=.22$), and length of residence ($r=.14$) correlate significantly ($P<.05$) with the number of national problems perceived. In terms of the same variables for local problems, only education remains statistically significant ($r=.20$). Income, race, age, sex and length of residence are statistically nonsignificant. The strength of the correlations between the traditional demographic variable and the number of perceived problems accounts for little variance. The influence of education upon the ability to articulate problems is apparent but not strong.

Contact with Stations

This ascertainment survey sought to assess the relative interdependence of the ability to perceive a community problem and having voluntarily contacted a radio or television station. The correlations between contacting a station and perceiving local problems are significant ($r=.17$, $p<.01$) and for national

problems and contact (r=,13, p=.05). The relationship is interesting in that as the number of problems perceived increases, so does the likelihood of contacting a station. Yet, it should be stressed that those who do contact a radio or television station are a minority of the sample, in this case twenty-two percent.[7]

From tabular inspection the following observations can be drawn. Men are significantly more apt to contact a station than women. In terms of age, the young are more apt to contact from those under twenty years of age to those fifty years is quite monotonic. Education is of some impact:15% of the high school graduates report contact, while 24% of those with some college or more report contact. This finding is reinforced when one considers occupation. Those most likely to contact the station are professionals and blue collar workers. The unemployed, white collar workers, and college students are the least likely to contact a station (approximately 18% for each category.) Self-designated community leaders are no more likely to call or contact a station than their peers. Of some interest is that those most apt to contact a station are city residents of between three and seven years. The least likely to contact a station are new residents.[8]

Turning now to the type of media contact engaged in, it should be restated that overall only 22% of this sample reported any type of contact. Of the 60 individuals reporting contact with their local broadcast station,24% contacted only to praise programming, 53% contacted only to complain and the remaining 23% both praised and complained (that is, had more than one contact). There is a tendency

for contact to increase by the number of problems or issues a respondent can articulate. Further, as the number of perceived problems increases, so does the propensity for complaining rather than praising.

An examination of the type of media contact by demographic variables revealed that 64% of the contacters were males. While the females constitute only 36% of the contacters, more than two-thirds of them contact the media to complain, while only 14% contact to praise and 19% have contacted the media to praise its programming, 46% to complain and 24% to both praise and complain.

In terms of race and media contact, it is the blacks who display little interest in media contact. Of those who contacted the media, only five percent were black. This figure represents only three respondents, a figure too small to analyze. However, the figure does contain a valuable lesson in that it suggests few blacks will spontaneously contact the media.

The findings in terms of age, education and length of residence held few surprises. Youth, under 30, were slightly more apt to contact a station to praise its programming than the late middle-aged respondents. While few high school graduates contacted the broadcast media (approximately 14%, compared to 22% of those without high school diplomas and 25% of those respondents with some college education), when they did contact the media, seven out of eight complained rather than praised. Finally, length of residence has a unique relationship with one's type of complaint. Although residents with less than three years residency, as well as those with more than eight

years of residency complained about the same, approximately 40% for each group, 79% of the residents between three and seven years complained to their broadcast station. Last, two other observations are worthy of note, namely that of the occupations. The blue collar workers were more apt to complain than praise in comparison with other groups, and that when self-designated community leaders contacted a station, they were as likely to praise as complain. For instance, 38% of the community leaders who did contact the media either complained or praised while the remaining 24% did both. The comparable figure for complaining in the general sample of non-community leaders is 59%. It is apparent that self-designated community leaders are more likely to praise programming when compared with the public.

Causal Modeling

Throughout this paper a large number of variables and issues have been discussed. In an attempt to test a variety of observations, a path analysis was conducted with the more salient variables.[9] Since the type of comment made to a station resulted in such a small number of individuals, contact with the station rather than the type of contact (praise, complain, or both) was employed as a dependent variable. The variables as presented in Figure 1 are assumed to be recursive and linear. Thus age, gender and race precede one's type of education, which in turn antecedes one's

length of residence and income. A path coefficient in this instance illustrates the direct contribution that a variable makes to the next juncture, and excludes all indirect contributions. Thus race (being white) affects income which influences one's perception of local and national issues. Where no arrow or path exists between variables, there is no relationship (i.e., path coefficient is .10).

The results in Figure 1 suggest, as have the other types of analysis, that education is the crucial variable in explaining both the ability to articulate a perceived problem and media contact. However, the path to perceiving a local issue is quite direct, whereas the paths to perceiving a national issue are more complicated. Consider the relationship of length of residency to perceiving a national problem requires a path through media exposure (in this, a positive score means exposure to electronic media). Exposure then to the electric media for news is related to perceiving national problems but not local problems. This suggests that age, which is strongly related with length of residence, is not as tautological as it would appear in a retirement state such as Florida.

Finally, it should be noted that there is a direct path to contacting a station from sex. This means that being male increases the probability that one will contact the media (recall that 28% versus 17% of the females report contact).

SUMMARY

This study was an initial sortie into the public policy area of ascertainment surveys. The ramifications of the present study are quite tentative, but they are a beginning. It was found that 10% of the respondents could think of no problems. Respondents were more likely to think of a national problem in contrast to a local issue, with the percent of those not able to name a national problem being 14% of the sample compared to 35% who could not name a local problem. Some impact of the media agenda setting function is that 30% of those able to name a national problem were unable to name a local problem, whereas the converse, only 6% of those citing local problems, could not name a national problem.[10]

That more than one-third of the sample could not cite a local problem, need or issue should not create a false euphoria for the city fathers. Rather, the very people who perhaps need help or assistance mostly are often not sampled in telephone surveys and second, when contacted, they lack the skill to articulate their needs or problems. This supposition is reinforced if one considers the effect education has upon one's ability to cite local and national problems.

Given the problems cited by the respondents, a multivariate analysis of the data did not reorder any underlying generic types. One suspects that in part this is due to the pre-data processing coding that one engaged in prior to card punching. Second, it was argued that types of problems may be irreducible after a certain point. This issue deserves further study, however.

Last, an interesting phenomena was investigated; the possible relationship between perceiving a problem and media contact. Using path analysis, education, being male, and race were the most salient variables. Exposure to the electric media was necessary to articulate national problems. The absence of any direct path save gender suggests that many individuals are articulate and concerned. Given increased emphasis upon gaining access to the channels of communication, the role of the ascertainment surveys deserves increased attention as well as the use of voluntary feedback mechanisms in society.

Figure 1

The numeral one is assigned to 'male' in the sex variable; to 'white' in the race variable; to 'positive exposure to radio and television' in the media exposure variable; and to 'yes' in the contact variable. All other variables are regular interval level data, that is, years of education, residence, income and number of problems are isomorphic.

Footnotes

1. A substantial part of the Journal of Broadcasting, 16:387-439 (Fall, 1972) is devoted to ascertainment issues.
2. See Thomas F. Baldwin and Stuart H. Surlin, "A Study of Broadcast Station License Application Exhibits on Ascertainment of Community Needs," Journal of Broadcasting, 14:157-170 and David J. LeRoy, "Attitudes Towards Local Programming Needs: A Comparison of a Northern and Southern Sample of Community Leaders and Respective Publics," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 38:80-90 (Fall, 1972).
3. For convenient summaries consult Bernard Singer, Feedback and Society, (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1970), or Wenmouth Williams Jr. and David J. LeRoy, "Citizen Feedback: A Review of the Literature," Public Opinion Quarterly, submission.
4. CONTAM, "How Good are Television? (continued...)," New York: Television Information Office, 1969, pp.8-19.
5. Packet of materials, "ascertainment surveys," available from the Office of Research, National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C.
6. Dummy of dichotomous variables are discusses in a number of sources. For example, Herbert Blacock, Social Statistics, Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 498-506; also Fred N. Kerlinger and Elazer J. Pedhazur, Multiple Regression in Behavior Research, (Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1972), pp. 101-153.

7. Employing the more traditional methods of analysis, namely tabular analysis and where appropriate partial correlation, education was not a clear intervening variable. However, the data did indicate that a consideration of age, length of city residence and education had moderate effect upon perceiving and articulating problems. Naturally, this "finding" must await further study since the coefficients became somewhat unstable given the small N percent.

8. In fact, given other studies conducted since this survey, the figure 22% is quite high. In most studies since, we have controlled for individuals who telephone radio call-in programs. In this study for example, the radio call-in show is on the country and western station, hence a more pronounced drift of the middle and lower SES groups to have media contact in this study. For comparable state-wide data consult: "Florida Public Broadcasting Stations: Reach and Available Audience in Seven PTV Markets," Report to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Communication Research Center, Florida State University, 1973, pp. 17-19.

9. The path analysis reported here uses the methods due to Wright. See K.D. Lane, "Principles of Path Analysis," in Edgar Borgatta and George W. Borhnstedt (eds.), Sociological Methodology 1969 (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1969), pp.3-37. Readers should also consult Herbert M. Blalock, Jr. (ed.), Causal Models in the Social Sciences (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, Inc., 1972).

10. The inability of large numbers of the public to articulate problems and issues is a continuing area of concern to many political scientists. See Norval D. Glenn, "The Distribution of Political Knowledge in the United States," Dan D. Nimmo and Charles M. Bonjean (eds.), Political Attitudes and Public Opinion (new York: David McKay, 1972), pp.273-283.